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ABSTRACT

Attempts to assess the effectiveness of basic skills programs have been difficult. There is disagreement on the factors which underlie the reported gains. The Urban Education Studies program, through on-site studies, is uncovering programs and procedures which appear to be working well. Efforts are being made to gain a better understanding of the conditions that produce improvement. This paper deals with the factors that have been identified as main contributors to the success of the basic skills programs examined. They include: (1) well devised management systems which operate to direct instruction toward clearly stated behavioral objectives; (2) imaginative provisions for continued staff training, evaluation, and program modification; (3) the active involvement of parents in instruction; (4) imaginative programs which appear to change children's self concepts and/or to increase motivation in ways which contribute to gains in basic skills; (5) the integration of compensatory education programs with basic mathematics and reading in concerted efforts to raise the level of basic skills attainment; and (6) the inclusion of the community in the planning, development, and implementation of basic skills. (Author/AM)

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PROGRESS TOWARD RAISING THE LEVEL OF BASIC SKILLS

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PROGRESS TOWARD RAISING THE LEVEL OF BASIC SKILLS[1]

by

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Media coverage of public education in urban school districts presents a rather bleak view of its current status and gives little hope for its future. The spiraling cost of services and goods, migration to the suburbs, problems of drug abuse, and youth unrest have contributed tremendously to the public's pessimistic view of public education in America's big cities.

City schools are in a crisis. The public school which was once a temple of sorts is now fast becoming a ruin, according to writers of the Newsweek article "City Schools in Crisis."[2] The authors support their premise with the facts that achievement rates are low, drug abuse and vandalism rates within the schools are high, truancy and dropping out are epidemic. Publications which highlight and proclaim the problems which urban education faces are abundant. Identifying these problems is not a totally ill-fated effort. It aids to arouse the public, the consumers, and those concerned with delivery of services to search for solutions that will result in improvements in the schooling process.

The movement for "Back to the Basics" is the solution supported by some groups of parents, ministers, politicians, and businessmen. While this movement seems to gain momentum among the general public, educators most often contend that they never left the basics. Brondinsky[3] reported that the back-to-basics movement in some instances focused only on drilling in the three R's; in others, on a wide range of aims including

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[1]Based on participation in Urban Education Studies, directed by Francis S. Chase.

[2]Shiels, Merrill, et al. "City schools in crisis." Newsweek, September 12, 1977, pp. 62-70.

[3]Brodinsky, Ben. "Back to basic: The movement and its meaning." Phi Delta Kappan, March 1977, pp. 522-27.

patriotism and puritan morality. The demands for back to the basics have been motivated by a multiplicity of developments, including: (1) increased parental involvement; (2) the uncertainty as to whether the focus on creativity, humanistic objectives, and development of independent thinking was to be in addition to or instead of, mastery of the skills; (3) drop in test scores; and (4) the decline in financial support for public education.

Concern with the fundamental skills for learning has been expressed at every period in American history; and this concern was translated into a massive program of federal action in the 60's through the compensatory programs under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA). Among developments of the past two decades are the Right-to-Read Programs, the Targeted Reading Programs, the Targeted Mathematics Programs, Bilingual and Multicultural Programs, as well as the curriculum development fostered by the research and development centers and laboratories.

Whether they consider it back to basics, continuation with basics, or progress toward basics, many urban school districts have responded to the problems of public education with increased emphasis on skills development. The efforts to place emphasis on skills have resulted in curriculum development, increased utilization of technology, innovative programs, in-service training, and the like. A majority of the federally supported programs in the basic skills are compensatory programs. Attempts to assess the effectiveness of the programs have encountered many difficulties; and there is wide disagreement regarding the factors underlying the gains reported. Up to 1976, formal evaluations had not been carried out on many of the Office of Education programs. However, in 1976, the Office of Education published a catalog of Educational Programs That Work. The catalog listed some thirty "exemplary projects" funded under ESEA Title I and other types of projects identified as 1975-76 Developer/Demonstrator Projects and Joint Dissemination Review Panel Projects.

Billions of federal dollars have gone into aiding cities in meeting and solving the problems they are facing in educating today's youth. There are those who would believe that these dollars were wasted. The findings of the Urban Education Studies (UES) would tend to dispel that notion. One of the salient factors which surfaced was that federal dollars are financing many innovative programs that are viewed as successful (55 per cent Federal Supported, 14.5 per cent partially funded by the Federal Government). Local budgets are seldom able to support piloting innovative programs. Consequently, external funding through federal and private sources contributes much to efforts of finding more effective ways of meeting the needs of students.

Community leaders, recognizing that good schools are good business, have come to the aid of school systems in a variety of ways. This action is an encouraging development for big-city education. The assistance from community leaders includes a wide range of activities, such as: providing volunteer services, encouraging real estate agencies not to denigrate the school system to public buyers, keeping informed of the good things that are happening in the classroom, and providing financial support to schools.

An interim report in 1976 on the National Institute of Education (NIE) compensatory education study reported that: 19.5 per cent of all students in public schools (grades kindergarten through 8) receive Title I aid (5.9 million — 116,218, nonpublic or 5 per cent of total nonpublic). Of these funds, 53 per cent is allocated to reading; 19 per cent to math; and 10 per cent to language arts.[4] In the same year, the Annual Evaluation Report on Programs Administered by the U. S. Office of Education, Fiscal Year 1976 concluded that programs for improvement of the basic skills are beginning to produce gains:

> In summary, it appears that Federal programs for the education of disadvantaged children are beginning to have measurable, positive impact.

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[4]Evaluating compensatory education: An interim report on the NIE compensatory education study, December 30, 1976. NIE — U. S. Dept. of HEW, Washington, D. C.

> However, it is also true that the problems of improving the education of such children have been more resistant to solution than was imagined when the programs began in the 1960's and that much more remains to be done.

But, it was observed also that

> While some models tend to be more successful than others, it is also true that each model showed a range of effectiveness and that the outcomes appear to depend heavily upon local conditions. . . .

Other studies have attempted to identify crucial elements in programs for development of basic skills. For example, the NIE Interim Report, cited above, noted that four features of instruction appear to be especially important in determining children's learning: individualized instruction, instructional setting, time spent in instruction, and teacher training. A study of the Emergency School Aid Act, also published in 1976, concluded, however, that "The elements of a composite profile of school success common to both reading and math achievement included: parent involvement in the classroom, higher per pupil costs for remedial specialists, and the use of behavioral objectives." The same study found the key program components in the prediction of reading or math achievement to be: adequacy of instructional practices, administrative leadership, district-level support for new teachers, and less frequent use of positive reinforcement.[5]

While there is some agreement among the numerous studies regarding the importance of such general factors as staff training and other elements of effective program implementation, there has been no clear identification as yet of the combined elements that are crucial to success in particular situations. The Urban Education Studies, through on-site visits to successful programs in the basic skills are trying to gain a better understanding of the conditions that underlie programs which either have a record of producing achievement gains, or appear to hold promise for such gains. The teams investigating programs in basic skills in each of five districts include two experienced

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[5]Wellisch, Jean B. et al. An in-depth study of emergency school aid act (ESAA) schools: 1974-1975. Santa Monica: System Development Corp., 1976 (216 pp) ERIC ED 133 361).

school administrators with extensive experiences in the basic skills and one or more professors from urban universities. These teams focused their attention on programs which had been identified by the host district as unusually successful. Comments are offered below on a selected number of these programs to which the site-visit teams gave high ratings.

Management Techniques

One of the approaches which is beginning to produce results is to install management systems which operate (1) to direct instruction toward clearly stated objectives and (2) to monitor progress in achieving the objectives. Such systems are in various stages of development in a majority of the cities studied. In the Atlanta Public Schools, the Elementary Curriculum Development program incorporates a management-by-objectives format, provisions for staff participation and training, and the use of a leadership team in each school. The Dallas Independent School District has been working for three years in developing a "baseline curriculum" with specific mastery objectives at each grade level and suggested activities for achieving the objectives. In kindergarten through third grades, there is also a well-designed Early Childhood Education System which reinforces the "baseline curriculum." The Milwaukee Public Schools use a continuum of Reading Skills to coordinate all reading programs and similar devices for maintaining progress in mathematics and other skills.

Reading resource teachers are well trained and knowledgeable; but for various reasons, teachers did not seem to make full use of the services rendered.

In Oakland the Early Childhood Education program provides for individually designed instruction in reading, language arts, mathematics, and multicultural understandings. Oakland has also moved to provide additional training for all staff members, to increase parent participation, and to develop and use improved evaluation procedures.

Staff and Curriculum Development

Other factors which undoubtedly contribute to the success of programs in all areas, but which are likely to be of special importance in the basic skills, are the provisions for continuous staff and curriculum development. Participation of program directors and teachers in planning and curriuclum development tends to generate acceptance, understanding, and enthusiasm for programs. Moreover, teacher training keyed to the questions raised and the problems encountered by staff members is more likely to prove effective than training programs imposed from above. Oakland's Teacher Shelter operates on this principal and moves toward effective staff/curriculum development through assistance as requested by teachers. The Shelter began operations in August 1974 with a small staff from the Teacher Active Learning Center (established at San Francisco in 1970 on the model of the British Teacher Centers to serve teachers in the Bay area). Individual teachers come to the Shelter to raise questions or problems regarding materials, techniques of instruction, or any other aspect of curriculum on which they need information or other forms of help. An individual or group of teachers may use the Shelter to develop an apparatus for use in classrooms or to learn how to use calculators, Cuisenaire rods, electromagnetic kits, or other apparatus. The Shelter responds as fully as possible to the requests of individual teachers and helps to plan workshops and other group activities. The UES team was impressed by the work of the Shelter and recommended that efforts be made to encourage greater teacher participation.

The Atlanta Public Schools is reinforcing provisions for staff development through a Center for Reading Services which is supported from the local general funds budget. Teachers, on a school staff basis, are cycled into the Center for one week of released time for in-service training. During this period, teachers' needs are assessed, and individualized programs designed to improve teaching strategies in reading are developed.

The visiting team viewed the Center as an extremely significant effort for in-depth staff development and recommended that the services of the Center be made available to a larger number of teachers.

Parental Involvement

Another element which characterizes the more successful programs in the basic skills is the active involvement of parents in instruction. The Parent Partners program in Toledo involves training parents for tutoring and employing them as paid paraprofessionals. Many of the partners do their tutoring in the home of the student, and the parent of the student is required to be present during the session. The partners appear to have high morale and enthusiasm for this activity. This program not only offers a well-managed and well-coordinated tutoring effort, but it also provides a good community interaction network. Parents are dedicated to the program and children are profiting. It is an excellent program with many spin-offs such as: motivation for students and parents and improvement of home situations.

Through its program of Parents as Partners in reading, mathematics, and other subjects, Dallas is seeking to have parents monitor instruction and work with teachers in creating favorable environments for learning. The concept of partnership is promoted through parent conferences during which the specific strengths and weaknesses of the child are discussed, and suggestions made for ways in which a parent can improve the child's attitude or otherwise encourage reading.

Enrichment Activities

Some of the success stories concern programs which appear to change children's self-concepts by supplementing development in the fundamental skills with creative activities. The Dunbar Community Learning Center in Dallas — which has been functioning since 1969 to promote curriculum research, development, and implementation — has pioneered

a number of highly successful programs in subjects as diverse as reading, music, and physical education. The music programs, including Success Through String (modeled on the Suzuki violin method) and Learning Through Piano, have been phenomenally successful. The average family income of the students served was $5,021 when the programs were initiated in 1970, and only 8 percent of Dunbar second graders were reading at grade level. Yet, 41 percent of second grade students were above the norm in reading in 1976, and 32 percent were above grade level in mathematics (as contrasted with 7 percent six years previously). Moreover, the achievement of the students enrolled in the music programs has surpassed that of comparable groups not in the music programs.

Another instance in which the arts are being used for enriching learning experiences is the Elm Creative Arts Elementary School (kindergarten through fifth grade) in Milwaukee. Here, a resident artist, a resident dance teacher, and other visiting artists are adding such excitement to the elementary school curriculum that 56 per cent of the enrollment is now made up of middle-class students who have applied from outside of the all Black area in which the school is located. A visit to a reading class gave assurance that the basic skills are not being neglected.

Other programs which made favorable impressions on the site visitors included Atlanta's Verbal Skills and Prescriptive Laboratories and its provisions for reading remediation and enrichment in high schools; the Reading is Fundamental project as operated in Dallas; the Title I Math Center in Milwaukee, especially at the Allen-Field Elementary School; and in Oakland, the Compensatory Education Programs SB 90 and Title I. In Oakland, the autonomy given to the several schools has resulted in the development of the Peralta Year-Round School, the adoption of the Westinghouse PLAN at Madison Junior High School, and other modifications planned by the staffs of particular schools. Project Phoenix for the Talented and Gifted in Toledo represents a beginning on

providing for qualified students skills development that goes well beyond the minimal essentials.

There are a few examples taken from a much larger number of programs which were examined by the site-visit teams. A summary of conclusions and inferences follows.

Summary

Attempts to assess the effectiveness of the basic skills programs have encountered many difficulties; and there is disagreement on the factors underlying the reported gains. The Urban Education Studies through on-site studies, are uncovering programs and procedures which appear to be working well; and efforts are being made to gain better understandings of the conditions that produce improvement.

The following factors are among those identified as contributing to the success of the basic skills programs examined:

1. Well-devised management systems which operate to direct instruction toward clearly stated behavioral objectives. Examples are Atlanta's Elementary Curriculum Development, Dallas' "baseline curriculum" as reinforced by a kindergarten through third grade management system, Milwaukee's Continuum of Reading Skills, and the Early Childhood Program in Oakland.

2. Imaginative provisions for continued staff training, evaluation, and program modification. Examples are: Oakland's Teacher Shelter for effective staff/curriculum development; continuous evaluation and reporting on the effectiveness of program implementation in Dallas; and the Center for Reading Services in Atlanta.

3. The active involvement of parents in instruction. Examples include Toledo's Parent Partners Program in which parents serve as paraprofessionals; and the Parents as Partners in reading, mathematics, etc., in Dallas.

4. Imaginative programs which appear to change children's self-concepts and/or to increase motivation in ways which contribute to gains in basic skills. Examples are: the music programs (strings and piano), as developed by the Dunbar Community Learning Center in Dallas, and the newly established Elm Creative Arts Elementary School in Milwaukee.

5. The integration of compensatory education programs with the basic mathematics and reading in concerted efforts to raise the level of basic skills attainment. There is a preponderance of compensatory programs that are federally supported (Title I ESEA and ESAA); however, school districts are beginning to synchronize the efforts in the compensatory models with the regular classroom activities.

6. The inclusion of the community in the planning, development, and implementation of basic skills. The involvement of the citizens in tutoring progams and in advisory capacities enables the schools to develop a solid base of support.